Mimesis, Critique, Redemption: Creaturely Life in and Beyond Dialectic of Enlightenment

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“The text of Dialectic of Enlightenment,” writes Rüdiger Bittner, “is studded with words of religious origin. We find talk of guilt, of ban, of expiation and reconciliation and, especially prominently, of Unheil – a word that preserves a religious meaning thanks to its evident relation to ‘Heil’ (salvation).”¹ To this list Bittner might have added the creature and its variants creatureliness and creaturely life. The German noun Kreatur is derived from the Latin creatura and is a synonym for Geschöpf, both of which signify “the totality of the world, insofar as it is related to the activity of a creator.”² However Bittner is not alone in neglecting to bring the creature within Adorno’s theological lexicon. Christopher Craig Brittain, in his excellent study of Adorno and Theology, adds Bilderverbot—the prohibition on images of the divine—justice and the messianic to the terms identified by Bittner, yet, like Bittner, makes no reference to the creature—and this despite references in Dialectic of Enlightenment (DE) to the creaturely counting higher than the majority of these terms by some way.³ From one perspective, this relative neglect is surprising: the concept of creatureliness has emerged as an increasingly influential vehicle for the philosophical and literary analysis, and critique, of modernity. With several monographs being published in recent years on the subject of creaturely life in the works of Walter Benjamin, a thinker with whom Adorno is frequently associated, one wonders as to why Adorno’s
thought has not received similar attention. Yet from another perspective it is perhaps not so surprising, for although one finds, within *DE*, numerous references to the creatural—for example, Horkheimer and Adorno write of “solidarity with creaturely life,” “the attack on defenceless creatures,” “the death throes of the creature”—it is far from clear as to whether or not there lies any substantive unity behind these references; that is, it is far from evident, and this is certainly not the case in Benjamin, whether talk of the creatural is a rhetorical device, or whether it denotes something more essential or foundational to the work. In this essay I will argue for the latter. More specifically, I will argue that creaturely life, which I take to signify human beings as seen from “the perspective of redemption,” functions as a vital, if somewhat neglected, point of light in the normative constellation of *DE*. Creaturely life, I maintain, figures as a normative concept against which the manipulated sublimation of the mimetic impulse, in accordance with the logic of self-preservation, can be read as a form of domination. So understood, I posit the creature as a key figure in what David Kaufmann has termed Adorno’s “ontology of redemption.”

I

It is no doubt possible, as many commentaries have shown, to read *DE* without recognition of its theological language. The question thus arises, as Bittner asks, “is this talk rhetoric, or is it substantial?” The implicit answer to this question, in readings such as that developed by Steven Vogel, for example—who in his admirable treatment of the tradition of critical theory claims that a cognitive deficit emerges in *DE* by virtue of the circular normativity inherent to its argument—is that Horkheimer and Adorno’s theological language is merely rhetorical embellishment. Summarising his critical reflections on *DE*, Vogel writes,

Horkheimer and Adorno provide such a far-reaching critique of ‘enlightened reason’ as domination that it threatens to swallow itself, because their own strong normative claims (e.g. that domination is wrong) seem grounded on the very Enlightenment values they claim to be questioning.

According to Vogel, Horkheimer and Adorno avoid this circularity by speaking on behalf of the nature that is the subject of technological domination. The problem, Vogel concludes, is that by so speaking, Horkheimer and Adorno evoke

[a] kind of knowledge of the nature being harmed that would substitute for the natural science they want to reject, and they have noth-
ing to say about what this knowledge might be (beyond vague and unpersuasive appeals to animism) or how it might be justified.⁷

These conclusions, I believe, are inseparable from Vogel’s failure to acknowledge the theology which, as Robert Hullot-Kentor, a frequent translator of and commentator on Adorno’s work, states, “is always moving right under the surface of all of Adorno’s writings.”⁸ Contrary to appearances Horkheimer and Adorno do not rest their normative claims surreptitiously or otherwise on the “Enlightenment values” that they elsewhere problematise. Rather, it is precisely the categories of Enlightenment thought, and in particular the reduction of objectivity to the categories of the positing subject that the theological perspective seeks to circumvent. The circularity identified by Vogel dissolves itself upon recognition that the normative framework of DE is founded not in the Enlightenment, but in a certain form of onto-theological analysis which Adorno termed “inverse theology.” In light of this lacuna, Vogel’s own concerns regarding the vagueness and persuasiveness of Horkheimer and Adorno’s position must be criticised, given his lack of engagement with the theological elements of DE. It is to a brief, and by no means exhaustive, analysis of inverse theology that we now turn.

In a letter to Benjamin of December 1934 Adorno writes, with reference to the former’s great Kafka essay of the same year:

> Since I always insisted on such a position, before entering into your Arcades, it seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very one which sustains your thoughts here – it could indeed be called an “inverse theology.” This position, directed against natural and supernatural alike, first formulated here as it is with total precision, strikes me as utterly identical with my own.⁹

Whilst the appellation “inverse theology” is Adorno’s own, its “position” between or “against” the “supernatural and natural alike” is a position first identified by Benjamin with regards to Kafka’s prose: “There are two ways to miss the point of Kafka’s works,” writes Benjamin, “one is to interpret them naturally, the other is the supernatural interpretation.”¹⁰ Precisely how to interpret these remarks, and subsequently how to come to terms with the substance of the “image” of theology to which Adorno refers, is a subject of some debate.

In a recent paper on “Kafka, Critical Theory and Dialectical Theology,” Margarete Kohlenbach develops a reading of Adorno’s inverse theology that takes its starting point, correctly in my mind, from Adorno’s comments regarding his first, although now lost, Kafka interpretation. Kafka, Adorno writes, “represents a photograph of our earthly life from the perspective of a
redeemed life, one which merely reveals the latter as an edge of black cloth, whereas the terrifyingly distanced optics of the photographic image is none other than that of the obliquely angled camera itself.”

According to Kohlenbach, “this view of Kafka’s work captures an inversion of theology under two conditions.” Kohlenbach refers to the first of these conditions as a directional inversion. According to the thesis of directional inversion, inverse theology is characterised by its inversion of the perspectival orientation of traditional, or what Kohlenbach refers to as straight theology: whereas traditional theology attempts to understand God from the perspective of the earthly existence of humanity, inverse theology attempts to understand the earthly existence of human beings from the perspective of God, or alternatively, from the perspective of “redemption.” As she states, “Inverse theology provides a picture of earthly life that is seen, or receives the light by which it can be seen, from a transcendent position.”

In addition to the directional inversion, Kohlenbach further identifies an evaluative inversion: “While the straight theologian sees redemption in both God and God’s hidden dominion on earth, the inverse theologian sees nothing but damnation, absolute alienation, universal blindness and the hell of history [my emphasis].” Where the “directional” and “evaluative” inversions differ, Kohlenbach claims, is that the evaluative inversion, which inverts the positive evaluation of God to the negative evaluation of man, does not replace straight theology with its opposite, as does the directional inversion, but “realises and generalises the ”negative potential“ of traditional theology.”

The negative potential here refers, if I understand Kohlenbach correctly, to the judging and punishing as opposed to the redeeming function of God: by realising and generalising the former, Adorno’s inverse theology is read as marshalling the Divine condemnation of the sinful in the critique of modernity.

Whilst Kohlenbach’s reading may serve as an instructive point of entry, it is ultimately unsatisfactory. This is so, largely, when Kohlenbach reads Adorno’s later writings as being too closely aligned to his first reflections on Kafka; or, in other words, she fails to bring to light the ways in which Adorno’s reflections on theology stand against theology (the “supernatural”) itself. This failure is most clearly reflected in her characterisation of the “evaluative inversion” and the assertion that the perspective of inverse theology renders a wholly abject vision of human life. In order to correct this reading, it is necessary to examine Adorno’s comments concerning Benjamin’s treatment of Odradek, the bizarre figure who inhabits Kafka’s The Worries of a Head of Household.

Kafka’s works, writes Benjamin, are populated by powerful men—judges or secretaries—who, “no matter how highly placed they may be
...are always fallen or falling." These men, often slumped in posture, bear the weight of a "cosmic epoch" in which even the most mundane of actions requires mythical feats of strength. Such is, Benjamin argues, the weight of guilt that "attracts" the fathers of Kafka’s universe just as it does these holders of office. For Benjamin, Kafka’s universe is a prehistoric epoch—the very notions through which the self-consciousness of modernity has been articulated are absent in Kafka’s works: “Kafka’s modernity,” writes Kaufmann, can be “understood in analogy with the most primitive existence, before myth, before law”, and the “strangest bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt in Kafka is Odradek.”

It is with regard to the figure of Odradek that Adorno raises significant questions concerning Benjamin’s reading of Kafka. “It is merely archaic,” writes Adorno, “to have [Odradek] spring from the ‘immemorial world and guilt.’” Odradek is, to be sure, a figure of the distorted conditions of existence, but in locating Odradek’s origin, not in the “immemorial world and guilt” but in the Hausvater, whom we may take as a trope of the bourgeois subject, Adorno makes the point that the “distorted” or “fallen” state of existence ought not be interpreted in archaic (read: theological) terms, but in social and historical terms:

If his [Odradek’s] origin lies with the father of the house, does he not then precisely represent the anxious concern and danger for the latter, does he not anticipate the overcoming of the creaturely state of guilt, and is not this concern—truly a case of Heidegger put right side up—the secret key, indeed the most indubitable promise of hope, precisely through the overcoming of the house itself? Certainly, as the other face of the world of things, Odradek is a sign of distortion—but precisely as such he is also a motif of transcendence, namely the ultimate limit of the recognition of the organic and the inorganic, or of the overcoming of death: Odradek “lives on.”

Odradek, as a being without function in a world, which as Horkheimer and Adorno argued in the “Concept of Enlightenment,” is characterised by the reduction of all forms of objectivity to quantifiable, abstract entities for the purpose of their technical manipulation and employment, represents the possibility of the transcendence of this world. Odradek, in all its distortion, represents a figure whose “in-itself” cannot be rendered “for-him,” and it is precisely as such that he represents the source of die Sorge des Hausvaters. It is in this sense that inverse theology can be understood as shedding the categorical framework of traditional theology. This, I claim, is an aspect of Adorno’s position that is lacking in Kohlenbach’s reading. The recognition of the social-theoretical moment in Adorno’s thought reveals the at best
reductive and at worst erroneous character of Kohlenbach’s formulation of Adorno’s purported “evaluative inversion”: it is not the case that Adorno, or Adorno’s Kafka for that matter, simply assumes and denounces earthly life in toto. By marginalising the social-theoretical aspect of Adorno, not only does one obscure the sense in which inverse theology might be said to "stand against" the supernatural, but one obscures also its image of hope.

Although we have come some way to addressing the inadequacies of Kohlenbach’s reading, the theological moment of inverse theology has yet to be properly disclosed. In other words, we have yet to elaborate the conditions under which Odradek appears as a distorted figure. We can begin to do so by taking as our point of departure Adorno’s most famous, or perhaps infamous, expression of inverse theology:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be ... as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.23

As this passage suggests, the theological dimension of inverse theology is manifested above all in a preoccupation with redemption. Precisely what Adorno means by “redemption” is extremely difficult to pin down, however the problem can be initially clarified by considering Christopher Craig Brittain’s illuminating contrast between the theological moment in Adorno and the methodology of the Christian theologian Paul Tillich, under whose auspices Adorno completed his second Habilitationsschrift. Brittain argues that whereas Tillich saw in theology answers to the questions posed by the human condition in modernity, Adorno, in contrast, employs theological concepts to challenge, criticise and question modernity.24 Further, the questions posed to human beings—questions concerning, for example, the meaning and role of ideas such as redemption in the modern, disenchanted world—are given a decisively secular and materialist inflection inasmuch as they are questions that must be answered not by Divine means, but in and through human collective life. Thus, for Adorno to speak of redemption does not necessarily imply a positive theology, or the assumption of any perspective beyond that of human cognition. However, it is still unclear as to the substance of redemption; that is, we have yet to establish it as being more than a rhetorical expression of nihilistic pathos. To do so—and this is of the utmost significance for the reading of DE developed in the latter part of this essay—it is necessary to explore Adorno’s critique of idealism and
what Kaufmann refers to as Adorno’s “break with the immanence of the positing subject.”

In his inaugural lecture to the philosophy department of the University of Frankfurt in 1931 on “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno states:

The adequacy of thinking about being as a totality... has degenerated and consequently the idea of existing being has itself become impervious to questioning. ... The fullness of the real, as totality, does not let itself be subsumed under the idea of being which might allocate meaning to it; nor can the idea of existing being be built up out of elements of reality.

In this passage Adorno not only signals his distance from the Heideggerian project of fundamental ontology, but also expresses ideas of foundational importance for understanding his inverse theology: here he argues that the critique of society (“existing being”) stands in a relation of dependence to the ways in which we conceive the interconnection and interdependence of the subject and the objective world (“being as a totality”). Specifically, Adorno claims that the “fullness” of objective reality cannot be reduced to the categories of subjective meaning: the critique of society is, thus, for Adorno, dependent upon transcending the philosophy that would establish identity between the object of knowledge and the knowing subject. In his lecture on “The Idea of Natural History” Adorno identifies this very transcendence as the fundamental problematic of post-Husserlian phenomenology. According to Adorno, phenomenology from Scheler to Heidegger meant to replace a philosophy that aims at the dissolution of all categories of being into categories of thought and that believes itself able to ground all objectivity in certain fundamental structures of subjectivity, by an approach that establishes another kind of being, a region of being that is different in principle, a transsubjective, an ontic region of being.

That phenomenology failed to go beyond the categories of subjectivity is reflected, for Adorno, in its framing of the ontological question, not in terms of being in itself, but in terms of the meaning of being. By framing the ontological question in this manner, Adorno claims that the phenomenologists re-established the primacy of the subject over and against the objective world whose otherness is thereby foreclosed. In contrast to the proponents of modern idealism from Kant to Heidegger, Adorno argues that the question of ontology can only be answered “when reason perceives the reality that is in opposition to it as something foreign and lost to it,” that is, when it is set free from the categories of the subject and taken up in its objective
alterity. Only then can the “adequacy of our thinking about being” be secured and only then can “existing being” be brought to account. This is the task of inverted theology and redemptive critique.

As we have seen, what might be termed the negative moment of inverse theology realises its end of preserving objectivity in its otherness by shedding the categorical systems of both (second) nature—with its instrumentalisation of objectivity—and traditional (supernatural) theology—with its emphasis on transcendence. However, this negative moment is insufficient in itself. In order to consummate its understanding of objectivity, inverse theology requires a positive moment and it finds this in the category of redemption. As numerous interpreters have recognised, the problem of redemption is intimately connected with the concept of truth, both of which stand in an equally intimate relationship with that other neglected concept in Adorno’s work, hope. According to Kaufmann, there exist within Adorno’s corpus two distinct though interrelated notions of truth. The first, which involves the self-conscious recognition of “mere appearance,” is of little concern in the present analysis; the second is of the highest concern.29 Basing his reading on both Adorno’s Hegel book and Negative Dialectics, Kaufmann elaborates this second notion of truth by separating it from the conditions of predicative judgement. Accordingly, truth takes on a temporal determination (a theme to which we will return) to the extent that it emerges out of the processes of subjective reflection upon the “one-sidedness” or abstract character of predicative concepts. However, the truth of the object is not limited by its immanent determination, but—and this is crucial—involves transcendent determination. The truth of the object encompasses not merely what it is but what it may or should become. As Adorno writes, “‘A’ is to be what it is not yet. Such hope is contradictorily tied to breaks in the form of predicative identity. Philosophical tradition had a word for these breaks: ‘ideas.’”30 On Kaufmann’s reading, such ideas—amongst which we can number die Kreatur—appear in contradiction to reality as a “normative force, as a critique of things as they are and a foreshadowing of how they should be.”31 It is in this sense that we should understand Adorno’s claims that the critique of society is dependent upon “the adequacy of thinking about being as a totality.” To conclude, the reflection upon the truth of the object qua its transcendence of the actual, that is, under the aspect of its becoming, is as close as we can get to forming an image of a redeemed world—that is, a world that has become what it should be. For Adorno the Bildverbot remains normative. Nevertheless, such reflection, which seeks to release objectivity from its identity with the rational subject, is the ground, for Adorno, of all critique and the wellspring of all hope for a more humane society.
Having outlined the interpretive framework within which I take up *DE*, I would now like to turn to the text itself. Horkheimer and Adorno begin the methodological sketch “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History” with the following claim: “The human species is not, as has been asserted, a freak event in natural history, an incidental and abnormal formation produced by hypertrophy of the cerebral organ.” The possession of reason—by which man has distinguished himself, throughout European history, from nature—has, they go on to argue, save for “a few certain individuals” or even perhaps “a few countries over short periods,” consistently failed to raise humanity out of an animal existence. The natural history of human beings cannot be read as the increasing realisation of freedom and justice, as Hegel had claimed, and behind all so-called progress lies profoundly violent exploitation of the non-human: “[W]e owe the serum which the doctor administers to the sick child to the attack on defenceless creatures.”

From the perspective of “serious history” the postulation of human ideas as active powers in history, or still, as the culmination of history itself, when co-opted as “instruments of organisation,” engenders in them a dialectical reversal—freedom becomes oppression and history as the open-ended progress towards cultural enlightenment becomes, as Horkheimer and Adorno so famously claimed, barbarism on a hitherto unimaginable scale.

Amidst an analysis of modernity which is constitutive of what Habermas once called both Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s “blackest, most nihilistic book,” the fragment concludes with a powerful expression of tempered optimism:

The hope for better conditions, insofar as it is not merely an illusion, is founded less on the assurance that those conditions are guaranteed, sustainable and final than on a lack of respect for what is so firmly ensconced amid the general suffering. The infinite patience, the tender, never-extinguished impulse of creaturely life toward expression and light, which seems to soften and pacify within itself the violence of creative evolution, does not, like the rational philosophies of history, prescribe a certain praxis as beneficial, not even that of non-resistance. The light of reason, which dawned in that impulse and is reflected in the recollecting thought of human beings, falls, even on its happiest day, on its irresolvable contradiction: the calamity which reason alone cannot avert.

That this most enigmatic of all the passages dealing with the creaturely in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appears in a fragment which articulates the methodological or orientating presuppositions upon which the argument
of the book is based is telling. The hope to which the authors refer—the hope for better conditions—can be derived from neither their purported necessity nor their sustainability or permanence. In this statement Horkheimer and Adorno take aim at orthodox Marxism, modern notions of progress and the narrative of transcendental redemption in Judeo-Christian theology, each of which, in their own terms, prescribes a plan for the realisation of human happiness or the fulfilment of human potential; yet, each of them, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, is fundamentally implicated in the “general suffering” from which they seek respite. Rather, hope can only be derived from that which obstinately refuses assimilation to the institutions and thinking (“that which is most firmly ensconced”) which perpetuate what Horkheimer and Adorno see as the mythical cycle of domination and repression. The fragmentary and incomplete nature of the text notwithstanding, the passage above suggests that it is the “the infinite patience, the tender, never-extinguished impulse of creaturely life toward expression and light” from which the hope for better conditions must be derived. The evocation of creatureliness here, I maintain, is not mere rhetoric but reflects the motifs of inverse theology in two distinct moments. The first, which links creaturely life to the hope for better conditions, can be seen as a meta-theoretical injunction: hope cannot be derived from those systems of thought which would either reduce human experience to the logic of technological rationality or locate the alleviation of human suffering in the realm of the Divine. Hope must be grounded in a perspective which finds the truth of what it is in what it should be; that is, in the standpoint of redemption.

The second moment is not meta-theoretical but substantial and normative, yet it builds on the first. For, as we have seen, Adorno maintains that only by taking up reality in a manner that allows its otherness to reveal itself as otherness are we able to fashion perspectives from which to critique reality. By allowing human life to appear as it should be—by transcending the hegemonic categories of reified thought—human life appears as creaturely; that is, as characterised by “infinite patience,” its “tender, never-extinguished impulse toward expression and light.” So understood, creatureliness becomes a point from which to critique the actual conditions of human experience. This reading can be substantiated by drawing on several other passages within DE that make reference to creatureliness.

“For domination’s bloody purposes the creature is only material.” 37 This statement, evocative though it may be, could be taken as paradigmatic of the normative circularity, which, we recall, Vogel sees as fundamentally vitiating the position put forth in DE. The context within which this passage appears, no less than its pointed tone, indicates that its authors do, in fact, consider the reduction of the creature to a mere material to be an act of
domination. Whence do they condemn this domination? Certainly not, as Vogel suggests, from Enlightenment values such as human dignity or natural right, but from the very notion of creatureliness itself. To elaborate this idea it is necessary to recognise that the “never-extinguished impulse toward expression and light” by which Horkheimer and Adorno characterise creatureliness refers, I believe, to the mimetic impulse:

The chaotically regular flight reactions of the lower animals, the patterns of swarming crowds, the convulsive gestures of the tortured—all these express what wretched life can never quite control: the mimetic impulse. In the death throes of the creature, at the furthest extreme from freedom, freedom itself irresistibly shines forth as the thwarted destiny of matter.\(^\text{38}\)

Thus, human life as creaturely life, which is to say, the life that human life should be, can be read as a life in which the mimetic impulse is sublimated in the directions of “expression” and “light.” According to Horkheimer and Adorno this is emphatically not the case in modernity; and herein the normative character of creatureliness is revealed. The reduction of creatureliness qua the mimetic impulse to a permeable material is, for Horkheimer and Adorno, “the condition of civilisation.”\(^\text{39}\) We see this quite clearly in the episode of The Odyssey where Odysseus encounters Polyphemus. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the barbarity of the Cyclops is reflected not so much in his desire for human flesh as in his intercourse with nature and his fellow Cyclopes; the Cyclopes exist under the star of providence; they have no organised labour and no systematic methods of production; they partake in an archaic existence and are “older” than the Gods themselves. The Cyclopes have yet to sublimate the mimetic impulse to the ends of self-preservation, and they need not, for their brute strength means that they do not act from the same fear of otherness which is the genetic centre of Odysseus’ cunning. Rather, the mimetic impulse appears in the Cyclops’ attentiveness to his flock, in a creaturely “concern with creaturely life itself.”\(^\text{40}\) Within the modern epoch such concern is not annihilated but deformed:

Within this quagmire, solidarity with creaturely life expresses itself not so much in the animal protection league as in neo-Buddhism and the Pekinese, whose distorted visage... reminds us of the physiognomy of the court jester left behind by progress. Like the hunchback’s ungainly leaps, the little dogs’ features still represent mutilated nature.\(^\text{41}\)

First through magic and then through the rationalised techniques of
modern production, the mimetic impulse has been, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, sublimated in increasingly sophisticated and repressive ways. The reduction of creaturely life to a pliable material, the manipulated sublimation of the mimetic impulse, has the character of violence and in this way it is criticised to the extent that it resists and opposes the actualisation of the potential immanent to mimesis itself. It is, I contend, precisely this potential which is both reflected in Polyphemus’ more redeeming qualities and to which Horkheimer and Adorno refer when they speak of the “infinite patience” of creaturely life. This “infinite patience” signifies, I would argue, the creature’s dwelling upon the object, its “lingering” and “perseverance” with the object. In contrast to the abstract conceptuality of technological rationalism which in no time at all renders its objects comparable and exchangeable, the creature looks upon the world with those “sabbath eyes” which “save in their object something of the calm of its day of creation.”

Again, Adorno’s theological language is significant, for what he articulates in this passage, taken from Minima Moralia, is that the “infinite patience” of creaturely life approaches the truth of reality, where truth cannot be taken to mean an atemporal statement of correspondence between the subject and the object of knowledge, but rather a subject-object relationship in which the otherness of the object is given the duration it needs to disclose itself as objective otherness. In a passage from Adorno’s reflections “On the Use of Foreign Words” this connection between truth and creatureliness, intimated in the notions of “infinite patience” and the “never-extinguished impulse toward expression and light,” is further elaborated in contrast to language. As the expression of the creature’s “infinite patience” a “pure creaturely language… would be nothing but the quintessence of represented truth.” But precisely in virtue of this, such a language is “hidden from human beings or lost to them.” This language of truth is lost to humans because its source—the non-violent sublimation of the mimetic impulse, the sublimation that would preserve and elevate the mimetic impulse—is of little use in the ongoing drive for self-preservation.

III

With these last claims, the analysis of Adorno’s references to the creaturely presented herein attains a distinct proximity to certain meaning-dimensions of die Kreatur as it appears in Benjamin’s works. It is, therefore, perhaps of some interest that the present essay should conclude by briefly considering some of the ways in which Adorno’s thought approaches, yet, in the end, ultimately diverges from that of Benjamin. However, as the recent literature attests, the concept of the creaturely is a deeply polyvalent term within the
Benjaminian corpus. Thus, Eric Santner, for example, has uncovered a “bio-political” dimension to Benjamin’s thought, arguing that the latter’s writings constitute a seminal contribution to a tradition of German-Jewish thinking within which the creaturely signifies not merely

nature or living things or sentient beings, or even what the religiously minded would think of as the whole of God’s creation, but rather a dimension specific to human existence, albeit one that seems to push thinking in the direction of theology. It signifies a mode of exposure that distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life: nor exposure simply to the elements or to the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community.45

With regard to Benjamin, Santner argues that this condition of creaturely exposure to the vicissitudes of “natural history”—that is, the exposure to the emergence and decay of collective symbolic formations, a cyclical movement which attests to both the persistence of life “beyond the symbolic forms that gave it meaning” and the persistence of symbolic formations beyond the “death of the form of life that gave them human vitality”46—attains an orientating significance in the former’s Trauerspiel study inasmuch as it both motivates and informs Benjamin’s theory of allegory and the closely related insights concerning the melancholic disposition so central to the Baroque sensibility.47 Whilst there are no doubt a number of resemblances between Santner’s notion of creaturely exposure and the reading of Adorno which I have here put forth, their mutual irreducibility is equally apparent. In contradistinction to the perspective on Benjamin developed in Santner, Adorno’s Kreatur does not, strictly speaking, signify that which is exposed to the calculating logic of rational civilisation, nor does it point to that abstract, homogenous and bare life—which Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as the specimen—that is produced, perhaps “ex-cited,” by Western rationalism.48 Rather, Adorno’s concept of the creaturely posits, as I have argued, a mode of being within which the non-identical is redeemed in the process of its being set free from the categories of the positing subject.

In this sense, Adorno’s thought is, as I understand it, much closer to those aspects of Benjamin’s highly complex oeuvre which express, as Beatrice Hanssen states, the attempt “to retrieve a more originary ethico-theological responsibility” towards alterity; a responsibility which, in Benjamin, constitutes a crucial moment in the critical exploration of the limits of modern humanism.49 Adorno, conversely, situates the attentiveness (Aufmerksamkeit) that characterises this responsibility to otherness within a
utopian critique of instrumental reason which, as I have attempted to highlight, emphasises—and here only negatively—the decisive avenues of cognitive and expressive experience opened up by the “remembrance” of a mimetic relationship with nature which is not subordinated to the mediation of self-preservation. For although Adorno maintains that the language of truth is lost to us, truth itself is not. As we have seen, philosophy (“light”) as negative dialectic is a domain of truth; so too, is art (“expression”). If this essay has succeeded in either of its aims, if it has illuminated the creaturely dimensions of DE, and in so doing contributed to the understanding of the theological moment in Adorno’s thought, such success can only be partial. For it is my conviction that without a more extensive treatment of Adorno’s aesthetic writings, and in particular his early work on Kierkegaard—a treatment not possible in the present context—the conclusions drawn herein can be seen as no more than anticipations.

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NOTES


3 See Christopher Craig Brittain, Adorno and Theology (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2010).


7 Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid., 160.

Ibid.


Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," 112.


Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondance*, 68.

Ibid., 68-69. Adorno's reference to the “creaturely state of guilt” functions, I would argue, as a rhetorical device that evokes the still theological or archaic nature of Benjamin's reading of Kafka. Thus, I do not see this passage as contributing to our understanding of Adorno’s more substantive references to creaturely life.


Kaufmann, "Beyond Use, within Reason," 171.


Ibid.

See Kaufmann, "Adorno’s Ontology of Redemption," 72–74.

Kaufmann, “Adorno’s Ontology of Redemption,” 73.

Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 184.

Ibid.

Ibid., 185. I return to Horkheimer and Adorno’s reference to creatures in this and similar passages of the Dialectic of Enlightenment in due course.


Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 186-87.

Ibid., 210.

Ibid., 150–51.

Ibid., 148.

Ibid., 52.

Ibid., 208.

Adorno, Minima Moralia, 76.


Ibid.


See, for example, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 6. See also Alastair Morgan, Adorno’s Concept of Life (London: Continuum Publishing, 2007), 24–38.